

Grammar Games in the Age of Anti-Remediation

Margaret Tomlinson Rustick

ABSTRACT: Several states have now implemented policies restricting basic writers' access to four-year universities, and the students most likely to be affected are African American, Latino, and nonnative English speakers. The pressure to speed students' mastery of standard written English, along with the trend toward more explicit instruction in second language pedagogy, has resulted in a renewed interest in teaching grammar. While some of these recommendations claim that standard written English can be taught as one code among many, used for certain rhetorical situations, such approaches may not prove more inclusive when the syntactic features of academic writing are presented as relatively benign choices, nor do they adequately explain the different ways we process spoken and written texts. This article describes an approach using open-ended games to help activate the switch all writers must make, regardless of home language, when they shift from spoken word to print text.

KEYWORDS: anti-remediation policies, grammar, sentence-level instruction, literacy

In recent years, anti-remediation policies have been implemented in four-year universities across the country, from New York to California (Gilyard, Wiener, Gleason, Crouch and McNenny). While the doors to affordable higher education are not exactly closed, the gates are certainly being more carefully guarded, and basic writers are likely to find themselves—either by choice or coercion—in two-year colleges where they are expected to gain “foundational skills.”¹ For policy makers, employers, and even the majority of faculty outside composition programs, foundational skills are still most often defined as proficiency in the conventions of standard written English. And, as has been the case so often in the past, those students deemed lacking necessary skills are disproportionately nonnative English speakers, African American and Latino students.²

Margaret Tomlinson Rustick is currently an Associate Professor of English at California State, East Bay, where she teaches undergraduate composition and linguistics, and graduate courses in composition pedagogy and TESOL. She has also taught basic writing and ESL in two-year colleges, and a primary focus of her work is preparing teachers to help students make the transition to college-level writing. She has previously published on this topic in *Teaching Writing Teachers of High School English* and *First-Year Composition* by Robert Tremmel and William Broz and *Exchanges: The Online Journal of Teaching and Learning in the CSU*.

Not coincidentally, inside the field of composition there has been a renewed interest in grammar and sentence-level instruction, signaled by articles such as Sharon A. Meyers' "ReMembering the Sentence" and Bonnie Devet's "Welcoming Grammar Back into the Writing Classroom." Many of us might claim that the sentence was not forgotten and grammar was never really gone. Still, these authors speak to a void, responding to what Robert Connors calls the "erasure of the sentence" from our scholarly journals, a void that has often left teachers, especially those relatively new to the field, with little more than admonitions to teach grammar in context—whatever that might mean—and to keep error correction to a minimum. The absence of discussion about how to address sentence-level skills not only created a vacuum for teachers, it has contributed to the public backlash against basic writing programs. In her article "How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise," Lynn Quitman Troyka comments on the "draconian decision" to eliminate basic skills instruction from senior colleges in the City University of New York, arguing that anti-remediation policies, such as those enacted at CUNY, are to some extent due to our field's refusal to adequately address public sentiment about standard written English. According to Troyka, basic writing specialists "openly declared grammar didn't matter for writers. No nuances. So what if the public believes that it 'matters'? Privately, some faculty, myself included, held a more relative view. But in influential circles it became vogue for BW faculty to jump on that ill-informed bandwagon" (118). Whether or not we agree with Troyka's position, it is hard to deny that, when it comes to disputes over grammar, the battlefield has more often been littered with invective and generalization than reason or nuance.

While recent budget cuts to basic writing programs may be linked, in part, to the attitude Troyka describes, politicians have a long history of interfering in secondary school curriculum, which has done little to reduce the need for college remediation. For the past five years, I have been part of an effort to increase collaboration between university composition teachers and high school faculty from the predominantly urban secondary schools near my campus, California State University East Bay, a medium-sized state college located just south of Oakland, California.³ In an attempt to better prepare high school graduates for college, our Chancellor's Office has sponsored various partnerships with high schools, providing much needed opportunities for faculty to share information and teaching strategies across institutional boundaries.⁴ During one of our monthly meetings, an experienced college composition teacher climbed on that bandwagon Troyka describes and bluntly asserted that high school teachers should stop wasting their time

on grammar because university teachers don't care if students know it. Why then, asked a distraught high school colleague, are entering freshmen tested on grammar? In fact, our writing placement test includes a timed essay and objective questions that evaluate, among other things, students' ability to edit according to standards of conventional usage, as well as to recognize problems with sentence control and clarity. For the college teacher, students did not need explicit knowledge of, or instruction in, grammar to produce correct, effective sentences; for the high school teacher, it was the essential first step. Once the smoke had cleared and our terms had been defined (*What do you mean by "grammar"? What do you mean by "teach"?*), we were left with the inevitable question that is at the heart of the grammar debate: How do we increase students' editing skills and sentence control without traditional grammar?

As we explored that question, the teachers were intrigued by an approach I had developed that involves playing with sentence-length text, creating opportunities for students to discover the relationship between word functions and sentence boundaries without relying on grammatical terminology and rules. Personally, I wanted to avoid what I call the comma coma, the glazed stares and drooping eyelids that overcame even the most well-intentioned students every time I broached the topic of punctuation. This response was not only uncomfortable for me, but I could not convince myself that students were learning much in that state. Contrary to those who claim high schools are not teaching grammar, my college freshmen say their inattentiveness is a result of having heard it all before, and either they claim to know it, or they believe they never got it and never will. Both these assertions usually prove false, but students who have learned otherwise need some convincing. So I opt for a little sleight of hand, strengthening students' sentence-level fluency through games.

I agree with Rei Noguchi who claims it is a myth that students don't learn grammar because it is boring and complicated. Students learn other subjects they find difficult, and some of our best writers have no inclination to study grammar, leading Noguchi to conclude, "while the lack of interest in grammar is probably a contributing cause to the failure of formal grammar instruction, it is not the chief one" (5). Simply making grammar lessons more entertaining will not necessarily improve student writing. Increasing student engagement, difficult as that might be, is only part of the problem. The real challenge is changing the way we think about sentence-level issues, which requires tremendous fortitude amid growing conservatism, tighter budgets and reduced resources, and pressure to speed students' acquisition of standard written English.

Given the current climate, it hardly seems prudent to suggest students should spend their time *playing* with language. With the clock ticking, we may believe that explicit, direct instruction is the most efficient use of students' limited time. But teachers need to remember that the ability to control surface features of writing does not progress linearly; errors students seem to have mastered often reappear when they take on more complex writing tasks (Kroll and Schafer, Kutz, Corder, Mayher, Haswell, Carroll). Teachers also need to be especially careful not to adopt methods that feed into a deficit theory of error, most clearly articulated by Mike Rose, in which they assume students make mistakes simply because they don't know any better. Though some errors are due to a lack of explicit knowledge, many effective student writers cannot explain the rules while others, including nonnative speakers who have learned traditional grammar, know the rules but cannot apply them.

Recognizing the gap between students' internalized knowledge, or linguistic *competence*, and the *performance* errors that appear in their texts, many writing teachers have adopted methods that embody Stephen Krashen's "natural" approach to second-language acquisition: immersing students in the target language through extensive reading as a way to provide meaningful input, while focusing on the communicative aspects of writing rather than error correction and direct instruction in rules. However, Krashen's indirect methods also have been increasingly called into question, potentially contributing to the turn toward more explicit grammar in composition. Fueled partially by the high proportion of bilingual students known as "generation 1.5," who may be competent in spoken English but who have not yet acquired literacy skills necessary for academic success, second-language specialists have begun to reevaluate the role of direct instruction, evident in the current popularity of "focus on form."⁵

While second-language pedagogy offers important insights for composition teachers, we also need to keep in mind the differences between oral language and literacy development. Speakers of any language face challenges writing in their native language, moving between oral and written modes of communication, and we need to find ways to draw on the grammatical resources students have accumulated through spoken language without erasing the differences of print. One of the fundamental obstacles for students switching between oral and literate codes is the contrast between aural and visual communication. In order to become more adept writers, students need to exercise those mental muscles that are activated when they attend to the visual medium of printed language.

Recent neurolinguistic studies of reading help us to better understand the cognitive processes involved in comprehending print. For instance, in their research on how modality—oral vs. written—affects learners’ acquisition of vocabulary, Nelson, Balass, and Perfetti describe the “episodic trace” formed in working memory when test subjects encounter new words (26). The stronger the trace, the more easily a word is recalled. Since learners were better able to recall new words presented in print than in speech, the authors conclude that reading, which involves both phonological (auditory) and orthographic (visual) information, tends to leave a stronger trace than spoken language. The difference in the intensity of the episodic trace also helps explain why we are more aware of word repetition in print than in oral language. Since written words remain longer in the working memory, readers are more aware of seeing a word again, whereas listeners recognize repeated ideas but rarely notice repetition of individual words. To become meaningful language, individual words, whether spoken or written, must be processed in grammatical “chunks.” Again the intensity of the visual trace may account for some of the differences between oral and print language. Readers have more time to unconsciously examine the relationships between those elements; therefore, they can comprehend more complex and varied sentence structure than we typically use when speaking. Teachers who consider these differences in processing oral and visual messages may find alternative ways to help students develop the grammatical flexibility they need to be fluent in the literate code.

ACTIVATING THE CODE-SWITCH

Another sticking point as concerns the negotiation of grammar within meaning-based instruction has to do with code-switching. The idea of code-switching has been utilized by teachers who struggle to reconcile the goals of honoring students’ home language while simultaneously teaching them the conventions of standard written English. One response to this seeming contradiction comes from those who claim to utilize descriptive rather than prescriptive grammar, though this is problematic since the ultimate goal remains increasing correctness in standard written English. Drawing on sociolinguistic principles, descriptive grammar allows students to analyze nonstandard English, highlighting the logic and integrity of various dialects, and then contrast those “codes” with standard written English (see, for example, Dunn and Lindbloom, Tchudi and Lee). This approach appeals to teachers who, like Martha Kolln, believe that learning gram-

matical vocabulary necessarily leads to greater awareness. As Kolln states in her early rebuttal of the anti-grammar movement, “When we teach our students to understand and label the various structures of the system, when we bring to conscious awareness those subconscious rules, we are, in fact, teaching grammar” (“Closing” 141).⁶ Furthermore, descriptive approaches conveniently provide students and teachers with the terminology they need to discuss the rules of formal written English. Consider, for instance, the sentiment revealed in this advice to teachers in *Grammar Alive!*, a popular textbook coauthored by Martha Kolln:

It is all well and good to believe, as the linguists tell you, that all language varieties are “created equal” grammatically. But it is a different matter altogether to confront language use in your own backyard. The important news for teachers is that linguistic research is showing increasingly that the most effective way to achieve this mission lies through the techniques of contrastive analysis and code-switching. (Haussamen et al. 10-14)

As a tool for achieving the “mission” of teaching standard written English, contrastive analysis cannot also, simultaneously, create a more inclusive environment or wholly offset the resistance students feel so long as the focus lies on identifying the differences between their home language and accepted school codes. In fact, we may unintentionally re-inscribe the distance between those students and the institution, between them and those who happen to speak prestige dialects, adding to their sense of being outsiders. These approaches are most problematic when they present academic English as a fairly benign set of conventions writers adopt in order to meet (not *comply* with) the expectations (not *demands*) of the rhetorical context. Regardless of where we stand on the issue, we cannot simply ignore the relationship between power and standard English, a concern that has been addressed by scholars such as bell hooks, Geneva Smitherman, and Lisa Delpit. For Delpit, descriptive grammar, like the process approach in general, fails to meet the needs of student writers who are not already fluent in the dominant discourse of standard English and academic culture. Smitherman and hooks, on the other hand, argue that we need to transform the discourse that denies students access rather than promoting the kind of double consciousness necessary for them to “pass” in academic contexts.

Contrastive analysis can be more productively applied when it focuses on switching between oral and literate codes, a switch all successful writers

must make and one that is challenging regardless of the dialect students speak or the contexts in which they write. To be most beneficial, this analysis must examine the connection between the forms—the surface structures—and the processes of composing and comprehending text, paying careful attention not only to words that are used but also to the mental activity involved. From a rhetorical perspective, we recognize, as Deborah Tannen and Wallace Chafe point out, that speaking and writing operate on a continuum. Purpose and relationship with the audience are more significant determiners of similarity or difference than whether one is speaking or writing.⁷

Previous attempts to describe the relationship between oral and literate language tend to fall into extremes, either emphasizing the differences, particularly the distinctive features of academic discourse, or starting with the similarities between speech and writing but falling short when it comes to offering innovative methods to help students shift from one mode to the other. For instance, based on research in oral language acquisition and comprehension, Pamela D. Dykstra concludes:

Basic writers have already internalized the patterns of syntactic units, units which everyone strings along when talking. Now, we need to teach that writing is another way of organizing those syntactic units. Writing uses those same units but in a different structure. And if language is learned by acquiring the pattern, we need to focus on the patterns that phrases and clauses can take in a sentence. People acquire those patterns by internalizing them through experience. Therefore, our task is to instill the patterns of writing in our students' minds. That is a challenge! (140-41)

In response to this challenge and “[b]ecause basic writers are past the formative language acquisition stage when patterns are internalized unconsciously” (142), Dykstra recommends activities such as sentence-combining and imitation exercises that make students conscious of written sentence patterns through explicit instruction. While it is important for students to be more aware of structures specific to written discourse that they likely have not encountered in spoken language, it is impossible to introduce them to all the syntactic moves available to writers. Furthermore, though these kinds of lessons can increase students' stylistic repertoire, given the directive nature of most explicit instruction, students tend to see writing as a matter of correctness rather than choice, of “rigid rules” (Rose) instead of an incredibly dynamic system with virtually unlimited options. If we aug-

ment the kinds of instruction Dykstra recommends with games that invite more active, playful exploration of the contrasting ways we experience print and spoken language, students may more effectively learn to switch between literate and oral codes.

THE RULES OF GRAMMAR GAMING

It is important to understand that the primary purpose of grammar gaming is not to teach terminology or prescriptive rules, nor is it simply a way to have fun. Instead, the basic premise of grammar gaming is that students need to practice using language the way writers do. In contrast to the automatic, unconscious flow of speech, these activities require students to make deliberate but not explicitly rule-governed choices about language. Because successful writers tend to manipulate word order, many of these games involve moving words around, changing the meaning of the sentence and sometimes the grammatical function of words as a result of their position or relationship to other words. Another essential feature of these games is that they are all open-ended; there are no single correct answers. We call attention to the expectations of readers through collaboration, relying on the class to decide if something is acceptable, comprehensible, or grammatically “legal.” Although these debates can make teachers uncomfortable, the conversations are crucial for students. After I have led them through an activity, whenever possible I have students produce their own examples. They may not be able to use grammatical terminology to articulate what they have learned, just as many effective writers cannot name parts of speech or recite rules, but they are often able to imitate the linguistic moves embedded in the games, which helps them develop conceptual knowledge that informs discussions of word and sentence-level issues in their writing. These general principles serve as the basis for all the games, a few of which are explained below along with more specific recommendations for teachers who may want to develop similar activities. I hope even teachers who do not choose to use grammar games will find something in these explanations that helps them think differently about the challenges facing our students.

Start with students’ intuitive knowledge of grammar.

Debates about grammar often begin with a definition of terms, distinguishing the intuitive “grammar in our heads” and the explicit rules of

“school grammar,” which Patrick Hartwell refers to as “grammar 1” (111). Substantially less has been said about what to do with students’ intuitive grammar, how to make it explicit, or how to build on it. One vital aspect of Hartwell’s influential “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” often overlooked, is the importance of metalinguistic awareness and the role of literacy in developing that ability. According to Hartwell and other researchers he cites, the more extensive a student’s exposure to print literacy, the easier it is to develop metalinguistic awareness, and “the form of grammar 1 in the heads of literate adults seems profoundly affected by the acquisition of literacy” (113). To some extent, this observation accounts for students who somehow “get it,” and helps to explain why some students, those fortunate enough to have built up a repository of tacit knowledge by engaging with print text, respond more quickly when introduced to formal grammar.

Although extensive reading remains the best way to acquire this tacit knowledge, teachers also need to consider how students can develop grammatical awareness by working with texts of varying length, including sentences. To draw out students’ internalized grammar and make them aware of the ways meaning results from a combination of both grammatical and lexical features of words, I created a game using something similar to Chomsky’s “colorless green ideas sleep furiously,” a gibberish sentence Chomsky developed to demonstrate how internalized knowledge allows speakers to recognize grammatical correctness even in nonsensical expressions.⁸ I write about ten unrelated words on cards (paper plates also work well and can be displayed in a chalkboard tray), including some that have multiple grammatical functions: nouns that also act as verbs (“flies” is one of my favorites), past tense verbs that could be participles, participial/gerund/present progressive verbs. To create these groups of words, I test them to be sure I can get several different grammatical, nonsensical combinations. Then I line them up in random agrammatical order, and I ask volunteers to arrange them in as many “logical” combinations as possible. Without ever talking about parts of speech, we note how the meaning changes when the words are rearranged. Interestingly, every time I have introduced this game, whether the players are basic writers or experienced English teachers, the constructions they come up with follow a similar sequence. At first, they order the words in the familiar subject-verb-object pattern of speech. Then someone moves the adjectives or switches the nouns in the subject and object positions. With patience and encouragement, they discover constructions that are increasingly “literary.” Prepositions move to the beginning of the

sentence, participial phrases appear, or words originally used as verbs become gerunds. We debate these latter constructions, and the players recognize the difference between unusual word order and incorrect grammatical structures, all without naming a single part of speech. Students then create their own groups of words, seeing who can come up with a word set that produces the most combinations.

Though this activity does not result in knowledge that immediately improves test scores, students do begin to develop attitudes and insights that are essential in subsequent class conversations or individual conferences. One consequence is that students become more aware of how readers rely on the position of a word in a sentence to determine its meaning and function. Later, when I call attention to a word, one a student may have used incorrectly or perhaps an unusual structure in something we've read, students are substantially less confused when I ask them what a word is *doing* in the sentence, how it is functioning. Their ability to respond to those questions, I would argue, is evidence that they are developing metalinguistic awareness, which Hartwell claims can best be accomplished by presenting language as "literal stuff, verbal clay, to be molded and probed, shaped and reshaped, and, above all, *enjoyed*" (125, emphasis added).

Get them moving.

One of the key differences between speech and print is the quantity and type of syntactic movement available to writers, and much of this variety is a result of the different ways we process oral and written language. Because oral language disappears as we speak, we tend to use more predictable, repetitive sentence patterns, which listeners rarely notice. Nor are listeners bothered by repetitious words. To illustrate our tolerance of oral repetition, I ask my students how many times I said a particular high-frequency word, one I have repeated multiple times during a brief lecture but which, until I identify it, has gone relatively unnoticed. What happens, I then ask them, if you use the same word more than once in a sentence or several times in a single paragraph? Instantly, they recall their agonizing efforts to find a synonym for "said" or, in some cases, even alternatives for the word "the." Repeating words when one writes, students have learned, is taboo, and they believe their writing will improve if they simply know more words, a goal many try to accomplish by using a thesaurus. It seldom occurs to them to restructure or combine their sentences—a kind of revision we cannot do when speaking—instead of substituting a different word.

One game to increase students' awareness of syntactic movement that I developed in collaboration with Gabriele Weintraub, a high school colleague, is something we call "Sentence Survivor." The teacher divides the class into teams, then writes a long, compound-complex sentence, filled with adjectives and adverbs, on the board. For example, the starting sentence might be: *Barking loudly at the mailman, the big black dog scared the children playing nearby, so they ran quickly to their mother in the yellow house on the corner.* Each team takes turns erasing words in the sentence. They can remove one, two, or three words per turn: a single adjective, a determiner and a noun, an entire three-word phrase, any combination of words as long as they do not exceed the three-word limit and the remaining words form a complete sentence. The object of the game is to be the team that makes the last move, reducing the sentence to its least possible number of words, which can require some strategizing in deciding how many words to erase on a given turn.

Originally, we had students hold cards with individual words written on them, and they sat down after they were "voted off" the sentence. I modified it, using the chalkboard instead, because I found the earlier method logistically difficult to manage. However, the original approach has the benefit of increasing the amount of physical engagement, and the teams grow when the castaways join them, giving them an advantage of more brainpower as they consult on their next move. If the student holding the preposition is a notoriously good player, students may perform some remarkable linguistic gymnastics in order to get that voted off the sentence and onto their team. Regardless of the format, holding cards or erasing words on the chalkboard, invariably students make moves I had not anticipated, and I'm always amazed at the options they discover and how the meaning of the original sentence changes as the students play.

In addition to making students aware of the amount of movement possible within a sentence, games like Sentence Survivor require a great deal of deliberate attention to language. Even a fluent writer, one who has internalized a wealth of sentence patterns and who is confident in her ability to punctuate those constructions, rarely sees a flood of words automatically rush onto the page, and it is not simply a matter of waiting until the final stages to edit. Instead, successful writers weigh the options, consider the advantages of linking clauses within one sentence or separating them, and wrestle with emerging ideas as they finesse them into written form. They test word order, restructure sentences, revise as they write—all things speakers do not do. Written fluency, confused with speaking, appears to be spontaneous. In the words of our students, the writing *flows*. However,

they seem uncertain about what exactly makes writing flow, how attentive a writer must be to make this happen, and generally, to what good writers attend during the process.

In contrast to the varied sentence patterns of writing, oral sentence patterns are much more restrictive, tending to follow the subject-verb-object sequence in English. Speakers also rely on bound modifiers, such as adjectives and restrictive clauses that, if moved, cause confusion. Writers, on the other hand, make greater use of free modifiers, which can be placed in various positions within the sentence for rhythm and emphasis, as “on the other hand” in this sentence (see “Free Modifiers” for more examples). In addition, experienced, effective writers use absolute, appositive, and participial phrases at the beginning, middle, or end of sentences—all tactics speakers rarely employ. Much of our students’ writing, even when grammatically correct and error-free, fails to employ these literate strategies, relying instead on the predictable sentence structures common in speech. Rather than expecting students to memorize specific patterns or learn the definition of terms like “appositive,” we can help them shift from oral to written modes by involving them in the range and power of syntactic movement, calling their attention to how meaning is affected by the position of words in a sentence. Although rhetorical approaches to grammar do try to give students a basis for determining why one structure might be preferable to another, experimenting with syntactic movement may be a more fundamental—and pleasurable—way to heighten students’ sense of how words affect readers. At the same time, this approach helps students discover their own sentence patterns and strengthen their linguistic muscles.

Exploit the ambiguity of language.

In virtually any context, reading calls for a kind of precision that contradicts our students’ experiences with spoken language. Long, rambling sentences, the kind many of our students write, would be perfectly acceptable in speech and, in fact, have a kind of oral quality to them and lack the punctuation readers use to make sense of text. Punctuation, we know, is one means writers use to infuse print with some of the intonations, rhythms, and emphases available in speech. But students who punctuate by ear, placing commas where they pause to take a breath or believing the semi-colon indicates a longer pause than a comma, do more to reveal their peculiar breathing patterns than to help readers process print. The solution, it seems, is to teach students grammatical concepts necessary to correctly use punctuation.

When we describe the rules of punctuation only in terms of abstract grammatical constructs, we get no further than our students who try to mimic auditory intonation, and we misconstrue the importance of visual information. For instance, when I ask my students what makes a sentence a sentence, they respond with familiar and incredibly inadequate definitions: it expresses a complete thought; it has a subject and a verb (or predicate), say the more advanced grammarians among them. They frequently feel there must be some trick when I tell them my definition: a sentence is a group of words with a capital letter at the beginning and a period at the end. They begin to understand the significance of this statement when I talk about the sentence as a visual container. The elements I choose to put inside that container—the words, phrases, clauses—are together because I want my readers to see them as a single unit. Yes, there are some rules about what can or must go in there, which, if violated, may cause the grammar police to descend upon you. But ultimately, within those constraints, a writer has incredible freedom, much more freedom, in fact, than a speaker. Punctuation marks, I try to convince my students, are the keys to the handcuffs. With those keys in your pocket, you can take readers anywhere you want them to go, but you do need to consider where to place the markers readers use to negotiate meaning and avoid getting lost. Punctuation, then, becomes crucial for identifying junctures where readers can turn one way or the other, and this ambiguity underlies my Mysterious Punctuation game.

To play with punctuation as a tool for creating visual boundaries, I write a short story in which the perpetrator and the crime change depending on where the periods are placed. Since this game is easier with some knowledge of sentence boundaries and internal punctuation, which I review in mini-lessons, I use this game fairly late, after we have had other opportunities to play. I pass out copies of the unpunctuated text, and students take turns supplying the punctuation until they reach the point where they want the sentence to end. Notice, for instance, what happens in this short passage from the story:

WHEN THE DOOR OPENED THE POLICE OFFICER STEPPED
INSIDE WITHOUT ASKING THE BUTLER REACHED FOR THE
CANE AND REMOVED A SMALL REVOLVER FROM THE GILDED
HANDLE WHILE HE CAREFULLY FOLDED THE PIECE OF PAPER
WITH THE SECRET MESSAGE HARRY WORDSMITH LISTENED
TO THE TUMBLERS OF THE SAFE FALLING INTO PLACE KNOW-
ING HE DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TIME THE POLICE OFFICER
CHARGED INTO THE ROOM WAVING HIS REVOLVER

Disagreements erupt when students interpret events differently, and they revise their decisions by examining how punctuation affects the meaning of the text. As with all our games, it can get messy, but those conversations are more meaningful and instructive than I have ever seen in traditional grammar activities. I usually have students do this activity in class, orally, making their decisions on the spot and talking their way through the sentence, “speaking” the punctuation by saying the words “comma” or “dash” or “period.” Other teachers, with less confident students, have had them first work individually, silently, and then share and compare their punctuated stories. In either case, for the game to work, students need to talk about the choices they have made and why a reader might expect something else. The whole-class activity can also lead to individual or group work in which students create their own punctuation mysteries, making them more aware of potentially ambiguous constructions as they try to write sentences with multiple interpretations. In addition to making students conscious of the physical, visual boundaries created by punctuation, this activity gives them new ways to discuss troublesome concepts like fragmented sentences. Rather than claiming a sentence is missing a subject or a verb, that it is a subordinate clause and therefore a fragment, students are more likely to see the confusion that arises when fragments can be attached to either the preceding sentence or the following one.

Ambiguity, many teachers would argue, is the antithesis of good writing, and our job is to eliminate it, not play with it. When it comes to language use, composition teachers are notorious for their love of clarity and precision. We have been known to litter the margins of student papers with “AWK,” “Redundant,” “Vague Pr Ref” and “Word Choice.” Teachers who embrace the notion of facilitative rather than directive feedback find it especially difficult to comment on word and sentence-level issues in student writing, potentially adding to the misperception that we no longer care about correctness. Others may dodge the question of why we respond to language in certain ways, claiming the rhetorical context as sole authority and arbiter, potentially demonizing audiences that demand a certain stylistic propriety. I am not bothered by your errors, we tell our students, but they—our colleagues in the institution or the test graders or future employers—will be. Instead, we can do our students a greater service by helping them understand how all readers rely on visual cues to interpret print texts, and how something like a missing comma or a misspelled homophone can cause confusion. But until our students learn to see text instead of hear it, those lessons will fall on deaf ears.

CONCLUSION

One of my colleagues who read an early draft of this essay and was enthusiastic about the grammar games asked if I had done any empirical studies to prove these methods work. Although I am interested in data that would help me understand how student writing is affected by these activities, I am not convinced that empirical evidence would do much to influence teachers' attitudes about grammar instruction. While reviewing the scholarly debates surrounding grammar, beginning with Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Shorer's 1963 study through the current turn to form-focused instruction, I often felt as if I were reading a freshman paper on abortion or capital punishment; nobody ever seems to change their mind, and writers (re)interpret evidence or attack others on the basis of deeply entrenched beliefs rather than objective analysis. At the same time, changes do occur in the amorphous cultural scene, influencing us in subtle ways that, periodically, become observable phenomena. Without the right social, political, and economic conditions, we would not have implemented open admissions policies in the 1970s, just as those same conditions, adversely perceived, have contributed to anti-remediation policies today. In the face of such uncontrollable forces, individual biases and cultural trends, it is hard to believe anything, from empirical studies to the most fervent pleas, will do much to stem the tide that seems to be turning against basic writers and returning teachers to more traditional grammar instruction. I have little faith that my suggestions will impress staunch grammarians.

With the appearance that less directive methods have failed, teachers, especially those who are relatively new to the profession and who missed the early days of the grammar debate, may see no alternative but to teach terminology and rules through skill-and-drill exercises. Admittedly, we may have relied too heavily on reading to develop tacit awareness, never making grammatical knowledge explicit, and many of us lack the time or training to effectively build bridges between reading and writing. Teachers who subscribe to a natural approach, immersing students in reading and writing with minimal grammar instruction, hope experiential learning will help build that intuitive knowledge which students may have missed in their formative years. Those who take a more direct approach, be it through imitation exercises or rhetorical grammar, may believe their students are past the critical period, the age when language acquisition occurs naturally. For students who lack the necessary literacy background, nature has arrived too late, so, like second-language speakers whose errors have fossilized, teachers may

look to an intervention—explicit instruction, modeling, and opportunities to practice the appropriate constructions.

But what if the “switch” that allows students to move between oral and literate codes is neither missing nor suffering from faulty wiring? What if it has simply never been turned on? I don’t mean to suggest that playing games will open the floodgates of previously untapped linguistic resources, or that gaming should replace all other sentence instruction. However, it does not necessarily follow that some students are simply born to be writers and those who are not must be subjected to skills and drills rather than more active approaches that encourage them to have fun with language. I do know that people who are avid readers and writers *enjoy* language. They grow up to be crossword puzzlers, Scrabble meisters, punsters, people who derive pleasure from playing with words. All our students deserve to experience that pleasure. Teachers need to understand the source of their increased concerns over error—changes in their student population, the need to do more in less time, pressures that arise as their colleagues return to more traditional grammar instruction—and we need to find productive, not reductive, ways to respond to these concerns.

Notes

1. The term “foundational skills” appears in documents such as Executive Order 665, issued by the California State University Chancellor, which states, “Campuses are encouraged to establish and enforce limits on remedial/developmental activity and to advise students who are not making adequate progress in developing foundational skills to consider enrolling in other educational institutions as appropriate.”

2. Gail Stygall observes that stricter remediation policies coincided with efforts to end affirmative action, and Steve Lamos further argues that policies affecting remediation are often tied to racism. Supporters of CUNY’s decision claim fears of lost minority enrollments were greatly exaggerated, pointing to the fact that under the new policies African American enrollments are down by only 2% and Latino enrollments dropped by 3%. However, describing the results of CUNY’s decision, Jon Marcos notes that, from 1999 to 2004, the community colleges that are part of the CUNY system saw an 18% increase in enrollment, twice the increase their senior colleges experienced in the same time period, and “Eighty-six percent of freshmen entering the com-

munity colleges now need at least some remedial work, more than double the national average. Only 28 % graduate with a degree within five years, less than half the rate at SUNY community colleges. Almost 80 percent of CUNY's community college students are minorities, and 60 percent grew up speaking a native language other than English."

3. My university is proud of its diverse student population: 29% white, 28% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 13% Latino, 12% African American, 18% "other," a category that reflects, in part, our many multi-racial students. We are not so proud of our remediation rates, which hover around 60% for entering freshmen.

4. The meeting described in this article was part of the Collaborative Academic Preparation Initiative, which has since been replaced by the Early Assessment Program. For more on the Early Assessment Program, see the website at <<http://www.calstate.edu/EAP>>.

5. Michael Long distinguishes between "focus on form" and "form focused" instruction. Form focused instruction, he notes, includes traditional grammar exercises presented at a time and in a sequence determined by the instructor. In contrast, Long writes, "Focus on form refers only to those [grammar] activities that arise during, and are embedded in, meaning-based lessons; they are not scheduled in advance, but occur incidentally as a function of the interaction of learners with the subject matter or tasks that constitute the learners' and their teacher's predominant focus." In this sense, Long's focus on form is similar to teaching grammar in the context of student writing when teachers address grammatical topics at the moment they occur in student writing or reading. However, as the research of Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis shows, teachers who claim to employ a student-centered focus on form frequently revert to what the researchers call "preemptive" instruction, in which the teacher plans in advance what grammar topics to cover. The teacher then typically explains those topics rather than utilizing the kind of spontaneous, interactive conversation Long advocates.

6. Kolln has more recently referred to her methodology as "rhetorical grammar," as in the title of her 1996 *English Journal* article, and she has included some consideration of the effects of grammatical choices on readers. While rhetorical and generative grammars may be alternatives to formal instruction, Kolln's explanations are still dependent on teachers and students know-

ing terminology, and her commitment to the essential role of vocabulary in developing grammatical awareness appears not to have diminished.

7. In the same way that effective informal writing can “sound” like speech, oral performances that require deliberate choices, such as playing the dozens and hip hop, can result in products that Kermit E. Campbell describes as “literate art” (127).

8. This example, which has been discussed by several linguists, originally appeared in Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* (Paris: Mouton, 1957).

Works Cited

- Basturkmen, Helen, Shawn Loewen, and Rod Ellis. “Teachers’ Stated Beliefs about Incidental Focus on Form and their Classroom Practices.” *Applied Linguistics* 25.2 (2004): 243-72.
- Campbell, Kermit E. *“Gettin’ Our Groove On”: Rhetoric, Language, and Literacy for the Hip-Hop Generation*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005.
- Carroll, Lee Ann. *Rehearsing New Roles: How College Students Develop at College*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.
- Corder, Stephen Pit. *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. London: Oxford UP, 1981.
- Crouch, Mary Kay, and Gerri McNenny. “Looking Back, Looking Forward: California Grapples with ‘Remediation.’” *Journal of Basic Writing* 19.2 (2000): 44-71.
- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press, 1995.
- Devet, Bonnie. “Welcoming Grammar Back into the Writing Classroom.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 31.1 (2002): 8-17.
- Dunn, Patricia A., and Kenneth Lindbloom. “Why Revitalize Grammar?” *English Journal* 92.3 (2003): 43-50.
- Dykstra, Pamela D. “The Patterns of Language: Perspectives on Teaching Writing.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 24.2 (1997): 136-44.
- “Free Modifiers.” *Writing Across the Curriculum*. Northern Illinois University. 7 April 1997. 2 November 2006. <<http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/freemod.html>>.
- Gilyard, Keith. “Basic Writing, Cost Effectiveness, and Ideology.” *Journal of Basic Writing* 19.1 (2001): 36-42.

- Gleason, Barbara. "Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time: The Politics of Remediation." *College Composition and Communication* 51.4 (2000): 560-88.
- Hartwell, Patrick. "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar." *College English* 47 (1985): 105-27.
- Haswell, Richard. "Error and Change in College Student Writing." *Written Communication* 5 (1988): 479-99.
- Haussamen, Brock, et al. *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2003.
- Hinkel, Eli. *Teaching Academic ESL Writing: Practical Techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Kenkel, James, and Robert Yates. "A Developmental Perspective on the Relationship Between Grammar and Text." *Journal of Basic Writing* 22.1 (2003): 35-49.
- Kolln, Martha. "Closing the Books on Alchemy." *College Composition and Communication* 32.2 (1981): 139-51.
- _____. "Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson." *English Journal* 85.7 (1996): 25-31.
- Kroll, Barry M., and John C. Schafer. "Error Analysis and the Teaching of Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 29.3 (1978): 242-48.
- Kutz, Eleanor. "Between Students' Language and Academic Discourse: Inter-language as Middle Ground." *College English* 48.4 (1978): 385-96.
- Lamos, Steve. "Basic Writing, CUNY, and 'Mainstreaming': (De)Racialization Reconsidered." *Journal of Basic Writing* 19.2 (2000): 22-43.
- Long, Michael H. "Focus on Form: A Design Feature in Language Teaching Methodology." Ed. Kees DeBot, Ralph B. Ginsberg, and Claire Kramsch, *Foreign Language Research in Crosscultural Perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 39-52.
- Marcos, Jon. "CUNY Sheds Reputation as 'Tutor U.'" *National CrossTalk* Spring 2005. National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education. <<http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/cto205/front.shtml>>.
- Mayher, John. *Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990.
- Meyers, Sharon A. "ReMembering the Sentence." *College Composition and Communication* 54.4 (2003): 610-28.
- Micciche, Laura R. "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar." *College Composition and Communication* 55.4 (2004): 716-39.

- Nelson, Jessica R., Michael Balass, and Charles A. Perfetti. "Differences Between Written and Spoken Input in Learning New Words." *Written Language and Literacy* 8.2 (2005): 25-44.
- Noguchi, Rei R. *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991.
- Rose, Mike. "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University." *College English* 47.4 (1985): 341-59.
- Skretta, John A. "Why Debates about Grammar and Usage 'Tweak' Me Out." *English Journal* 85.7 (1996): 64-67.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin that Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Stygall, Gail. "Unraveling at Both Ends: Anti-Undergraduate Education, Anti-Affirmative Action, and Basic Writing at Research Schools." *Journal of Basic Writing* 18.2 (1999): 4-22.
- Tchudi, Steven, and Lee Thomas. "Taking the G-r-r Out of Grammar." *English Journal* 85.7 (1996): 46-54.
- Troyka, Lynn Quitman. "How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise." *Journal of Basic Writing* 19.1 (2000): 113-23.
- Wiener, Harvey S. "The Attack on Basic Writing—and After." *Journal of Basic Writing* 17.1 (1998): 96-103.